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RUSSIA'S ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA'S INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

CASE STUDIES: MALI AND CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

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Russia's Activities in Africa's Information Environment

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CONTENTS

Introduction4

1. Russia’s Narratives in the Information Environment.....6

2. Russian Narratives in the Context of Peacekeeping Missions in Mali
and the Central African Republic.....9

3. Russia’s Activities in the Information Space of the Central African Republic19

Conclusions.....27



INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on Russia's strategies in Africa.

The first ever Russia-Africa summit, co-hosted in October 2019 by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in Sochi, was presented by both Russian and international media as a milestone in Russia's return to the African continent. Leaders and delegations of the vast majority of African states met with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and other Russian representatives to discuss possible projects of cooperation between their respective countries. The summit ranked among the largest of recent Africa-partner summits (EU-Africa, China-Africa, US-Africa, and Japan-Africa). For example, Russia was able to welcome more state delegations than the US at their summit. The declared initiatives of cooperation appeared impressive, ranging from nuclear energy, oil and gas, to automobile production and financial loans for various fields.¹ This meeting sparked numerous claims by both Western and Russian media that Russia is a key player in the region. There are plans for organizing another summit in 2022.

Nevertheless, contemporary Russia's role in Africa cannot be compared to that of the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the situ-

ation has changed dramatically. Russia is a minor player in Africa compared to other powers, such as the US, China, India and several EU countries.² Russia also faces competition from other important global players, such as Brazil and Turkey, as well as emerging regional actors, such as Nigeria and South Africa.

In addition to this new reality of competition between external actors, the continent underwent and is undergoing important internal changes. First and foremost, African countries are increasingly becoming the subjects of international politics and are poised to play a more significant role in world politics in the future. Secondly, the African middle class is growing. After several years of economic growth, it is estimated that the population of the African middle class swelled to between 170 million and 300 million people, and is expected to grow even further. As a result, the middle class is increasing its political demands, as they occupy a larger share of political decision-making through elections and civil control.³ Recent popular uprisings in Sudan or Zimbabwe are evidence of this. Russia, traditionally supporting 'stability' in the form of local dictators, suffered reputational losses in these countries. Although there are tendencies toward authoritarianism in some countries, such as Tanzania, Guinea, and



Burkina Faso, the general trend indicates that political participation among African populations is increasing.⁴

This paper consists of three parts:

- 1. Based on open sources, first part analyzes Russia's goals and how the country attempts to reach them in four main fields: diplomacy, political communication, the military, and the economy.** This analysis addresses two main questions – what Russia's policies are and what implications they may have on the region. The paper discusses the whole of Africa, while simultaneously acknowledging the broad nature of the topic and the political, cultural, and economic differences between individual African countries. Two cases of particular interest, Mali and the Central African Republic, are analyzed in greater detail, revealing the complexity of Russian strategy in specific countries. Based on these findings, the paper concludes with recommendations for addressing Russian interference in Africa.
- 2. Second chapter analyses Kremlin-sponsored media narratives published in the context of five ongoing peacekeeping and counter-insurgency missions in Africa - United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Central Africa (MINUSCA), the European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic**

(EUTM RCA), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the European Union Training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and Operation Barkhane. A total of 561 articles were sampled from Kremlin-sponsored online news websites RT France and Sputnik France. These two outlets were selected due to their status as "key public diplomacy tools" of the Russian government, their popularity in France, which is one of the major troop contributing countries in the Sahel, as well as their popularity in some of the countries that host peacekeeping missions (Mali and the Central African Republic). The study followed a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis, during which narratives were manually detected.

- 3. Third chapter is based on social media analysis of pro-Russian content on Facebook pages, Facebook profiles, Facebook groups, Telegram channels, Telegram profiles, Twitter feeds, and websites.** Working with a programmer, all posts from several Facebook pages with pro-Russian narratives were scraped. CrowdTangle was used to discover other Facebook pages and groups sharing similar material. The study followed a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis, during which narratives were manually detected.



1. RUSSIA'S NARRATIVES IN THE INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Russia builds its communication strategy towards Africa on several pillars.

First and foremost, the absence of a Russian colonial past in Africa forms a keystone of Russia's information strategy. For example, during his interview with the TASS press agency a day before the Sochi meeting, Vladimir Putin pointed out that, "we can see that some Western countries put pressure, frighten or blackmail governments of sovereign African countries. Through these means, they try to regain their lost influence and dominance in former colonies. Now in the new form, they try to overprofit, exploit the continent with no regard to the people living here, ecology and other facts. Probably, in order to prevent that anybody would block these policies, they try to block closer Russia-Africa relations."⁵ The purpose of the 'colonial past' argument is to subvert the positions of European countries in Africa, namely France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Germany.⁶

Kremlin is extremely skilled at inflating information about its successes. Tied loans, where the customer receives a loan for the purchase of Russian goods, are presented as investments or even aid, and mem-

oranda of understanding are presented as concluded projects. Anton Kobayakov, Vladimir Putin's advisor, announced that contracts in the volume of USD 12.5 billion were signed during the Sochi meeting, but he did not disclose any details. An oil refinery project in Morocco and a pipeline project in Congo have been discussed for the last 10 years, but a conclusion has not yet been reached.⁷ In another case, Rosatom, the Russian builder of nuclear power stations, presents eight projects in Africa (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Zambia, Tanzania, Namibia, and Uganda) in 'different stages of their fulfilment.'⁸ This is not to say that Russia did not succeed in the economic field, but their true value remains unclear due to a lack of government transparency.

In recent years, Russia has portrayed itself as a key player in the fight against Ebola.⁹ Similarly, the Covid-19 pandemic has provided Russia with another opportunity to provide humanitarian assistance to other countries, including those in Africa. Russia has capitalized upon this situation in its communication strategy by utilizing 'covid-diplomacy', which includes the delivery of supplies of personal protec-



tion goods to target countries in the continent.¹⁰ Russia, despite its own struggle with Covid-19, sent aid to Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia in North Africa, as well as Ethiopia and Djibouti in Eastern Africa. In southern Africa, the beneficiaries of Russian aid included the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.¹¹ The supply shipments were not particularly large or significant, but their delivery was heavily publicized. For instance, Russia sent eight tons of personal protective equipment (PPE) to Zimbabwe in September 2020, which was widely reported as an act of humanitarian aid by the Zimbabwean President, who stated, “the Russian Federation has been a great friend in the mobilization of financial resources to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.” He clearly linked this case with Alrosa’s investment in the diamond industry and Russia’s involvement in platinum mining.¹²

Russia uses political counsellors, or ‘political technologists’ according to the Russian expression, to help its allies achieve their political aims. In Zimbabwe, for instance, Russia provided Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was sworn in as president after the 2017 coup against Robert Mugabe, with electoral assistance during the election in 2018. As a result, Mnangagwa signed contracts with the Russians for platinum mining and with the Russian diamond company Alrosa.¹³

Russia has not always been successful in supporting local dictators. Russia experi-

enced a political failure during the 2019 elections in Madagascar. Political technologists campaigned for candidate Erié Rajaonarimampianina, but failed to secure him the necessary support to win the election. Even more strikingly, they later provided assistance to other candidates, but reached similar results. In this case, it can be assumed that Russian officials had underestimated the conditions prevailing in the country. Counsellors entered the highly monetized elections with relatively modest means. Their strategy included deploying internet trolls which, in a country with only 9.8 percent internet coverage, proved to be a costly mistake.¹⁴

Russian communication specialists were active in Sudan during the protests in January 2019. Under their surveillance, official channels spread fake news linking protesters to foreign powers, such as Israel. This went hand in hand with Russian official media presenting the protests as a result of foreign influence, warning against ‘external intervention’ and the destabilization of the country. Such a confluence was hardly a coincidence.¹⁵

Education plays an important role in nurturing and increasing the soft power of any country. In a document prepared for the Valdai economic forum, which is the key arena for discussions about Russia’s strategic orientation, it was asserted that, “instead of the old elites educated in the universities of the Soviet Union, new state officials, educated in the US, the EU or China are emerging. We must act now.”¹⁶



To this end, Russia revived some of the old Soviet programs aimed at African students, including scholarships. According to Rosstat, the Russian chief statistical bureau, around 16,700 students from Africa receive their tertiary education in Russia.

¹⁷ The Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, the most prominent of Russia's higher education institutions that traditionally hosted African students during the Soviet era, currently has around 1,200 students from the African continent.¹⁸

Institutionally, Rossotrudnichestvo is responsible for spreading Russia's soft power through the representation of Russian cultural and scientific centers.¹⁹ It currently operates in Egypt, Zambia, the Republic of Congo, Morocco, Tanzania, Tunisia and Ethiopia, and concentrates on increasing the quota of African students in Russian universities.²⁰ Furthermore, associations of African alumni of Russian universities are organized. Nevertheless, their size and impact are relatively small, although Russia strives to increase their visibility through broadcasting their activities.

Military services and the sale of Russian armaments play an essential role in Russia's future programs in Africa. In this field, Russia has meaningful advantages over Western countries. The nature of the Russian

state, where democratic control is limited and the sale of Russian arms – which are both relatively modern and cheap – is encouraged, allows for this area of cooperation to develop. In 2014, when the scandal over atrocities committed by the Nigerian army against Boko Haram rebels emerged, the United States stopped supplying the army with attack helicopters. Russia, on the other hand, was ready to fill this gap and supply Nigeria with its Mi-35.²¹

Africa, especially its sub-Saharan region, does not feature prominently in Russia's security considerations. Russia's army operations in Africa are modest, excluding their anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden that have taken place since 2008. Russia limits its official army presence to participation in missions led by international organizations and to sending instructors to countries that request such assistance. The participation of Russian officers in UN missions and the presence of Russian instructors are limited compared to the contributions of Western countries or China. However, Russia demonstrates its determination to change this situation. According to a leaked German Ministry of Defence document from 2015, Russia established military agreements with 21 African states with various depths and degrees of cooperation.²²



2. RUSSIAN NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF PEACEKEEPING MISSIONS IN MALI AND THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

This chapter analyses Kremlin-sponsored media narratives published in the context of five ongoing peacekeeping and counter-insurgency missions in Africa - United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Central Africa (MINUSCA), the European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA), the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the European Union Training mission in Mali (EUTM Mali) and Operation Barkhane. A total of 561 articles were sampled from Kremlin-sponsored online news websites RT France and Sputnik France. These two outlets were selected due to their status as “key public diplomacy tools” of the Russian government, their popularity in France, which is one of the major troop contributing countries in the Sahel, as well as their popularity in some of the countries that host peacekeeping

missions (Mali and the Central African Republic). The study followed a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis, during which narratives were manually detected.

While the geopolitical contest with the West was previously concentrated in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Middle East, the expansion of the scope of Russian military, economic, and diplomatic activities signals that the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West has now expanded to the African continent.²³ Commenting on the growth of Russian influence in Africa, former US national security adviser John Bolton warned that Russia would “interfere with U.S. military operations and pose a significant threat to U.S. national security interests”²⁴, an assessment which was later supported by two high-ranking US security officials.²⁵



A report by the French Policy Planning Staff (CAP) and the Institute of Strategic Research (IRSEM) further affirms this claim by outlining how Russian “information manipulation” has the potential to undermine Western operations and “create a hostile environment for an external military operation”.²⁶

A recent report commissioned by the French government suggests that Kremlin-sponsored media, in particular RT and Sputnik, are rising in popularity across the African continent. This is evidenced by a significant increase in subscribers to the RT France Facebook page (from 50,000 to 850,000); the vast majority of which were from countries of the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa, and the discovery that African online news websites are relaying content from Kremlin-sponsored media on a large scale.²⁷ In fact, the report found that both channels “have succeeded in their aim to obtain the ‘normalisation’ and institutionalisation of their position as part of the media landscape of French-speaking Africa”.²⁸

This study aims to provide an overview of narratives prevalent in Russian-sponsored media outlets, given the demonstrated potential of news and media narratives to influence attitudes, perceptions and public opinion²⁹ as well as the Russian governments’ previous efforts to leverage such influence.³⁰ The study will focus on Kremlin-sponsored French-language online news outlets RT France and Sputnik France, given their status as “key public di-

plomacy tools of the Russian government and their popularity amongst the French population as well as French-speaking African audiences”.³¹

This study adopts the definition of narratives provided by the ‘Improving NATO Strategic Communications Terminology’ project, which defines narratives as “morals drawn from stories,” arguing that narratives are “formed and maintained in human memory and stories are the way of conveying narrative to others”.³² The study followed a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis, wherein narratives were manually detected during the course of analysis rather than pre-defined and deducted.³³ Individual articles (and sometimes even sentences) were considered capable of portraying multiple stories, therefore, multiple narratives were often derived from single articles. Relevant narratives were later grouped into ‘meta-narratives’ in order to ensure comparability, the most prevalent of which were included in the analysis. Additionally, the analysis noted the context in which each of the articles was published and whether they included positive or negative quotes toward either of the missions, recognising that “a well-placed quote [...] will convey a construction of an issue that could ultimately benefit a particular interest”.³⁴

The articles featured in this study were obtained directly from RT France (francais.rt.com) and Sputnik France (fr.sputniknews.com) and included articles published over a timeframe of six years



(01.01.2015 - 31.08.2020). The sample was collected using each website's built-in search tool and mission-specific acronyms (MINUSCA, EUTM RCA; MINUSMA, BARKHANE, EUTM). The total sample included 561 articles. Embedded tweets, images, and videos were not part of the analysis. Several articles mentioned multiple missions and were therefore included in multiple datasets.

A 2019 US government White Paper examining the Russian government's strategic intentions concluded that Russia "is indeed adhering to a global grand strategy", aiming to regain recognition as a 'great power', reclaim and consolidate its influence over former Soviet nations, gain influence over other nations worldwide, and finally, "refine the liberalist rules and norms that currently govern the world order" by portraying itself as a "reliable actor, a key regional powerbroker and a successful mediator".³⁵

In order to achieve these strategic aims, the Kremlin has employed a range of overt and covert influence techniques, blurring the line between public diplomacy and so-called 'active measures' – a Soviet term for techniques, such as the spread of disinformation and military threats.³⁶ The Kremlin's apparent control of the media, which is widely attributed to the democratic de-consolidation witnessed under the rule of Russian president Vladimir Putin³⁷, has played a significant role in the efforts to manipulate audience perception and exert influence. In fact, the emergence of

digital communication channels has amplified the reach and potential impact of such practices, "as the flow of information and the ability of states to convey messages directly to foreign publics has become easier and more cost-effective than ever".³⁸

The Kremlin has capitalised on this by successfully adapting to the digital age and rapidly developing its instruments and practices of information warfare.³⁹ In addition to utilising state-sponsored TV networks, the Russian government has in recent years broadened its operations to include online news websites, such as Sputnik and RT in several languages.⁴⁰

Narrative Analysis

MINUSCA. In total, 81 articles using the official mission acronym MINUSCA were analysed. As shown in Figure 1, the number of articles referring to the mission peaked in 2016, when numerous articles were published in the context of allegations of sexual misconduct perpetrated by French soldiers and UN peacekeepers (26). Other topical contexts in which the mission acronym was mentioned include the Central African Republic's domestic affairs (4), administrative mission changes, such as the end of Operation Sangaris (4), the deaths of three Russian journalists in the Central African Republic (3) and the 2019 peace agreement (4). More recent avenues of interest include bilateral relations between the Central African Republic and Russia



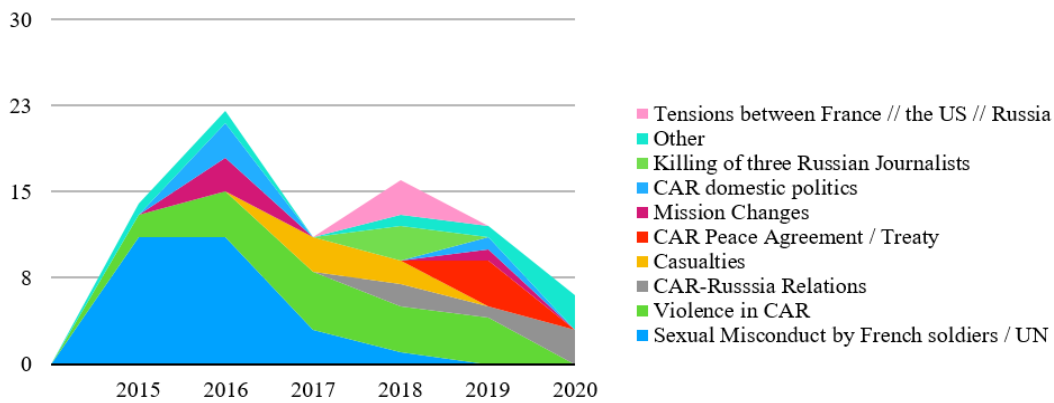


Figure 1: Context in which sampled articles referring to MINUSCA were published

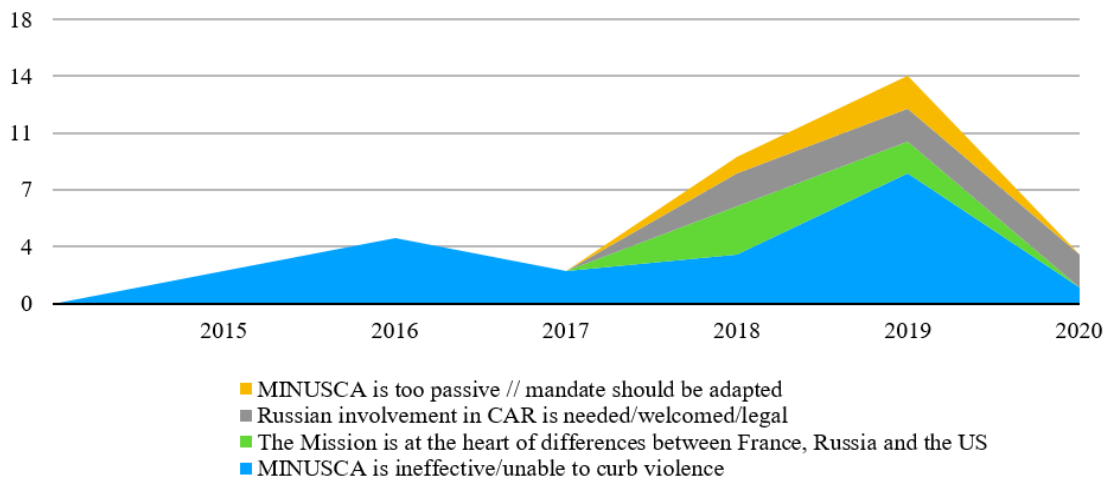


Figure 2: Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to MINUSCA

(6) as well as tensions between France, the US, and Russia (3). Over the past five years, the mission has also consistently been referenced in the context of the ongoing violence in the Central African Republic (19).

In total, four meta-narratives were identified (Figure 2). The most prevalent narratives portrayed MINUSCA as ineffective and incapable of curbing the ongoing violence (20). Narratives claiming that MI-

NUSCA is failing were consistently detected throughout the examined timeframe of nearly six years, with an uptick in 2019 as reporting on the allegations of sexual misconduct decreased. In recent years, an increasing number of articles promoted narratives labelling the mission as a point.

EUTM RCA. The only news agency included in this study to report on the EU Training mission using its official mission tag was Sputnik France.



The news service reported on the mission only six times since its establishment, five of which discussed the mission in the context of relations between Russia, France, and the CAR. The only other time the mission was mentioned was in the context of the killing of three Russian journalists in 2018. There were no identified use of direct quotes regarding the mission. Three main narratives were identified in the articles, all of which highlight the relevance of foreign military missions as an instrument of diplomacy and international relations, claiming, for instance, that ‘the Central African Republic has become a battleground of influence between major powers’. However, due to the fact that only six articles were found to directly refer to the mission over a period of six years, the key takeaway is that editorial interest in the mission is low.

MINUSMA. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali was established in April 2013, shortly after the French-led Operation Serval recaptured the northern half of the country, with the objective of “supporting the transitional authorities of Mali in the stabilisation of the country and implementation of the transitional roadmap”.⁴¹ MINUSMA provides operational and logistical support to the G5 Sahel joint force, which is aimed at combating “terrorism, cross-border organised crime and human trafficking in the G5 Sahel zone” and consists of forces from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger.⁴² The mission is widely considered to be vital to stability in the country, even as it is hampered by serious challenges and threats, such as increasing jihadist violence and the volatile political environment in Mali.⁴³

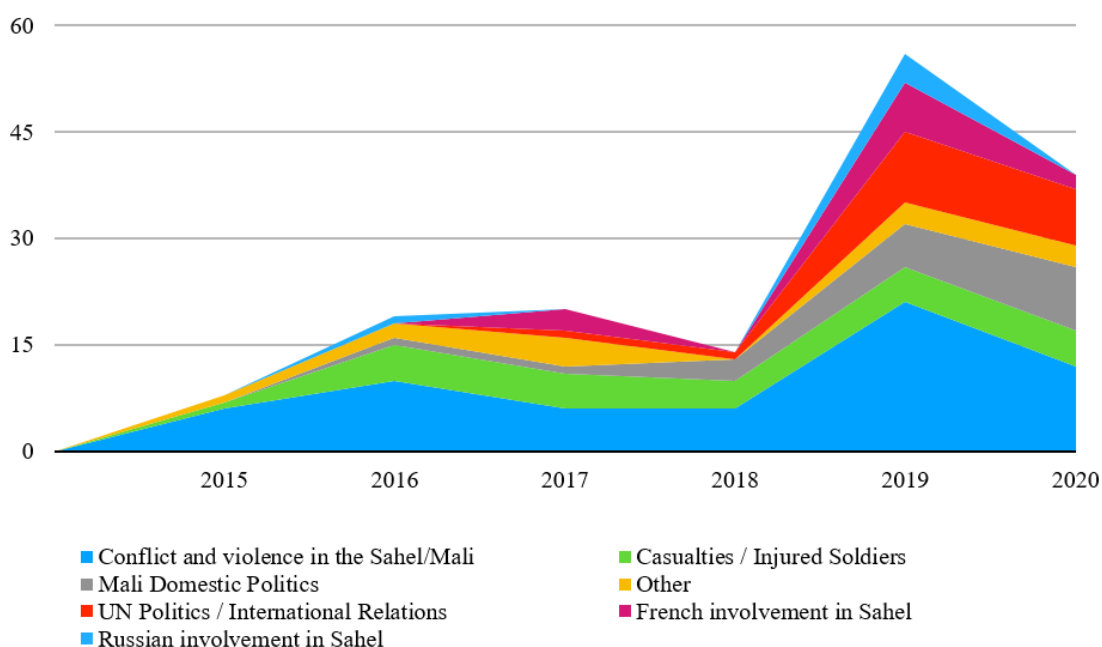


Figure 3: Context in which articles referring to MINUSMA were published



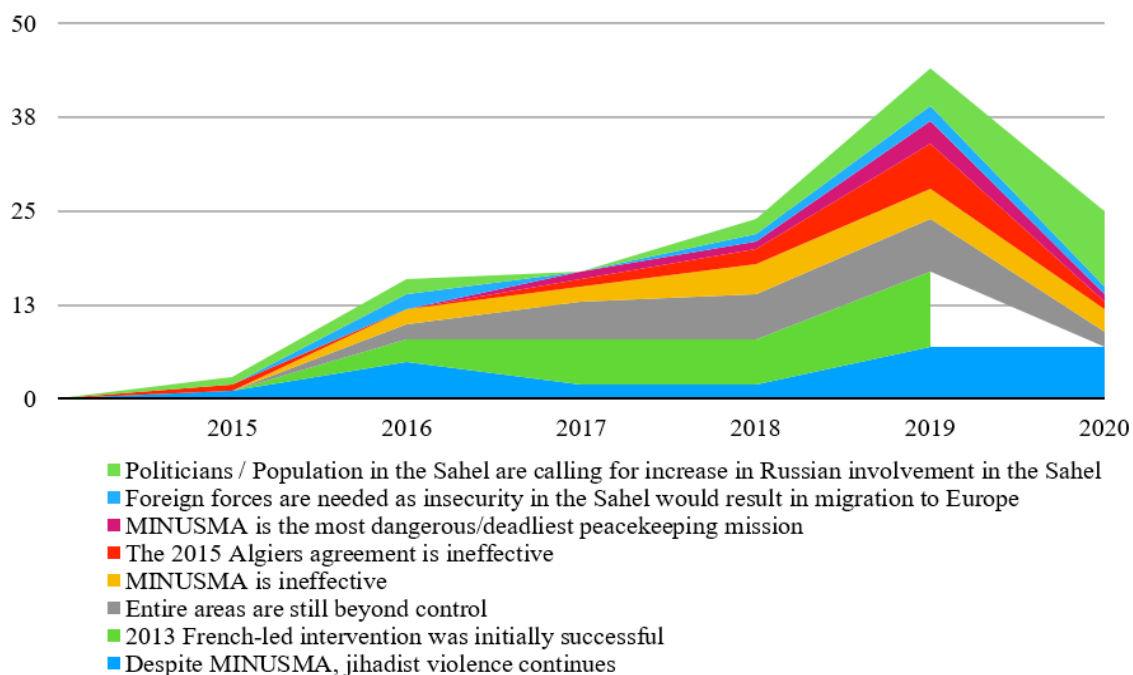


Figure 4: Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to MINUSMA

As of June 2020, the mission is the “most dangerous” UN mission to date, with 209 casualties among MINUSMA personnel.⁴⁴ There are currently just over 11,500 troops deployed to the mission, with the mission mandate set to expire in June 2021.⁴⁵

In total, 152 articles were found to refer to MINUSMA. Figure 3 shows a growing editorial interest in the mission, with the number of published articles rising from just 6 in 2015 to 51 in 2019. Most (51) articles referenced the mission in the context of ongoing conflict and violence in Mali or elsewhere in the Sahel as well as casualties among troops (25). Since 2016, a growing number of articles (20) referred to the mission in the context of Mali’s domestic politics, such as the 2020 coup or

protests. The mission was further found to have increasingly been mentioned in the context of French involvement in the Sahel in general (12), UN politics and international relations (12), and Russian involvement in Mali (5).

EUTM MALI. The European Union Training Mission Mali was established in January 2013 to train the Malian Armed Forces.⁴⁶ The mission mandate has been renewed four times and is currently set to last until May 2024.⁴⁷ Following the military coup in August 2020, the mission was suspended for three months but has since resumed.⁴⁸

The EU Training Mission in Mali was mentioned only 12 times across both RT France and Sputnik France in the five year period from 2015 to 2020. Five articles reported



on the mission in the context of general updates, three in the context of Malian politics and ongoing conflicts respectively, and one on the alleged misconduct of forces.

Two articles cited a quote referring to the mission negatively, whereas one quote was cited referring to the mission positively. In total, thirteen distinct narratives were identified among the articles, ten of which were critical of the mission or the forces involved, for example, claiming that ‘the EU and France are wasting billions on ineffective missions in the Sahel’ or that ‘EUTM action in the context of the 2020 coup was questionable’.

However, we were unable to identify a pattern in media coverage because the mission was rarely mentioned throughout the timeframe surveyed in this study. The only narratives which were mentioned more than once asserted that the 2013 intervention was initially successful (2) and that significant areas of Mali are still beyond control of the state (2).

Operation Barkhane. The French-led Operation Barkhane is a counterterrorism force, which succeeded Operation Serval in August 2014 and actively operates in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.⁴⁹ There are currently 5100 soldiers deployed to Operation Barkhane.⁵⁰

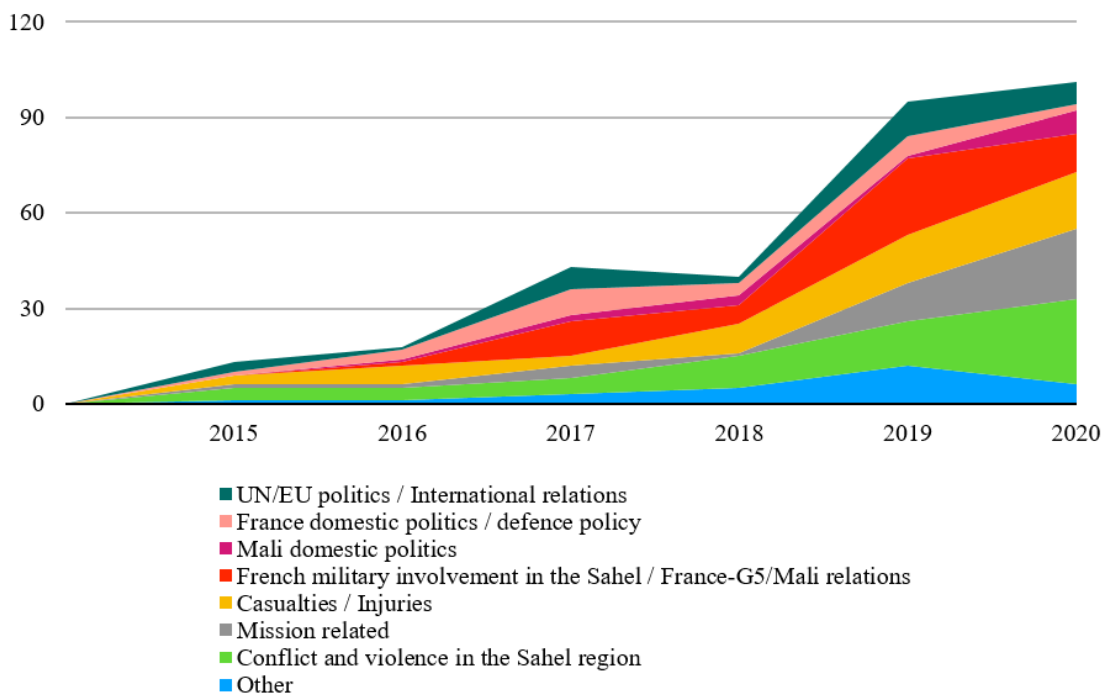


Figure 5: Context in which articles referring to Operation Barkhane were published



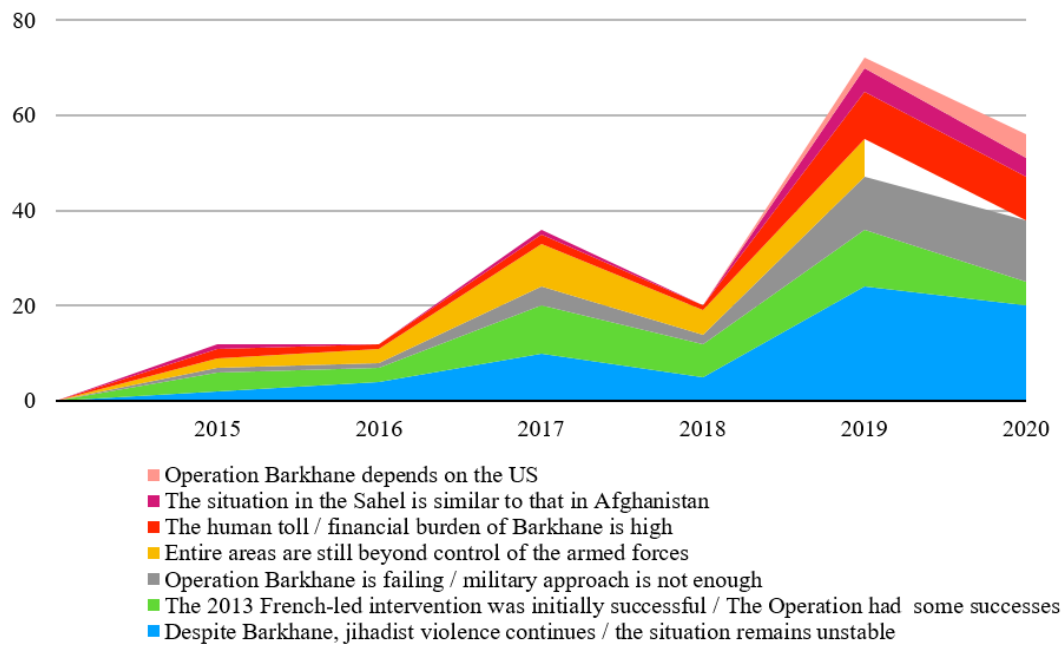


Figure 6: Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to the Operation (I)

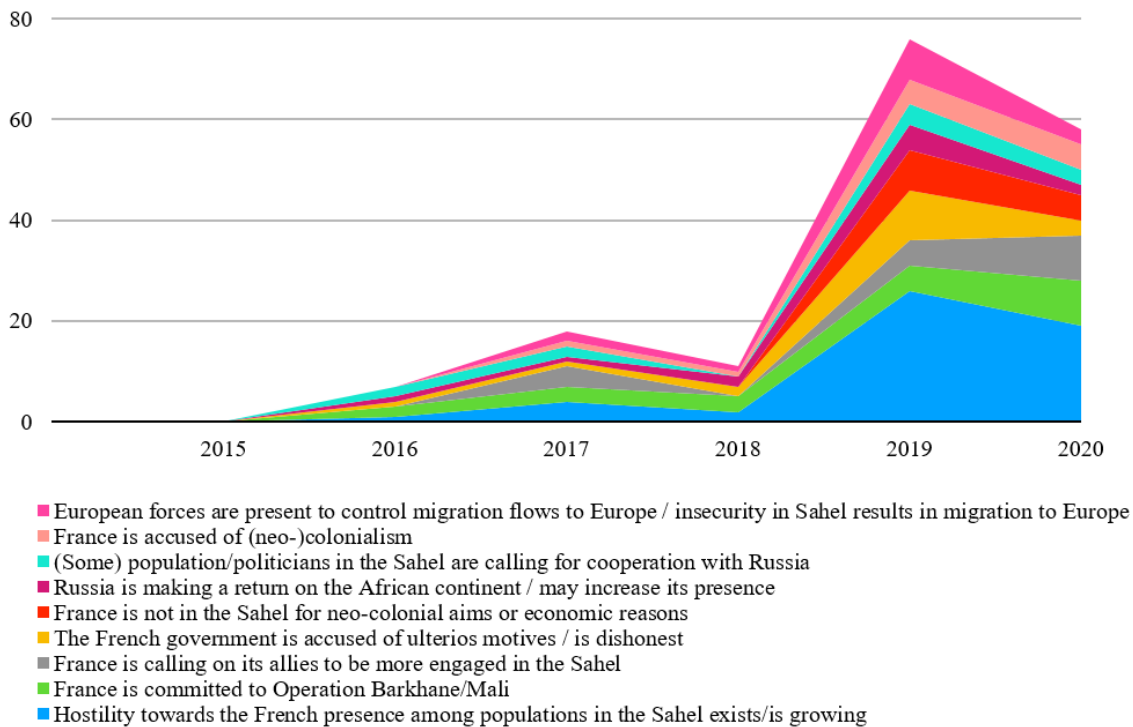


Figure 7: Meta-narratives detected within sampled articles referring to Operation Barkhane (II)



The operation – which was initially planned with a short-term operational scope – faces continued obstacles, such as “huge logistical challenges in hostile terrain” and issues in reliance on the cooperation of the civilian population.⁵¹ Barkhane is France’s largest overseas operation and operates on a budget of nearly 600m EUR per year.⁵²

The total sample of articles mentioning Operation Barkhane consisted of 310 articles, making Operation Barkhane the most referred-to initiative out of the five missions included in this study.

Figure 5 shows that editorial interest among Kremlin-sponsored media in Operation Barkhane has steadily increased. Throughout the years, the operation has consistently been referred to in reporting on casualties and injuries among troops (54) as well as the ongoing conflict in the Sahel region (64), French domestic politics and foreign-security policy (24) and UN/EU politics or other international affairs (31).

More topical avenues of interest include mission-related articles discussing the future of Barkhane as well as the newly-established Takuba Task Force (41), Malian domestic politics and events, such as the 2020 coup (14) and discussion around French involvement in the Sahel as well as French bilateral relations in the region (54).

A total of 13 articles cited a quote referring to the operation negatively, whereas 12 cited a quote referring to the operation positively (Figure 5).

All three of these narratives were found repeatedly throughout the six-year period surveyed in this study. Since 2015, we have observed articles highlighting the high human toll and financial burden of the operation (25) as well as claims that the Operation was failing or following a flawed strategy (32), but these were detected more frequently among the articles published in 2019 and 2020.

Assertions that the operation depends on US armed forces in the region for intelligence and logistics (7) as well as the claim that the situation in the Sahel is similar to that in Afghanistan, (11) have surfaced more recently.

The second set of narratives identified in the context of Operation Barkhane is shown in Figure 10, including six narratives regarding France’s role in the Sahel. The most prevalent narrative is that of existing or rising hostility toward the French presence in the Sahel (52), followed by the narrative that France is committed to Barkhane and Mali (22) and that France is calling for help from its allies (18). Additionally, 17 articles were found to include narratives, which accuse the French government of ulterior motives, such as exploiting the resources of countries in the Sahel, and generally question the normative basis of France’s agenda in the region. A total of 12 articles claimed that France was perpetrating (neo-) colonialism, whereas 13 articles included narratives claiming the opposite (France is not present in the Sahel for neo-colonial objectives or economic reasons).



Two narratives were found regarding the Russian Federation. A total of 11 articles claimed that Russia is returning to the African continent or may increase its presence in the region, whereas a further 11 articles claimed that populations or politicians in the Sahel are calling for increased cooperation or involvement with the Russian government. Finally, 14 articles concluded that European forces are present in the Sahel to control migration flows to Europe and that insecurity in the Sahel results in migration to Europe.

Inferring from the number of published articles that referenced the respective missions, the editorial interest of French-speaking Kremlin-sponsored media in the EU Training Missions in the Central African Republic and Mali appears to be relatively low, while there is greater interest in both UN missions and high interest in Operation Barkhane. Furthermore, the number of articles referring to MINUSCA was found to have peaked in 2016, whereas the number of articles referring to MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane was found to have steadily increased, especially in 2019 and 2020. This shifting level of interest is surprising as Kremlin-linked documents leaked in 2019,

which ranked African countries on a scale from 1-5 according to Russian interest and cooperation, only listed Mali as a 'potential partner' whereas the Central African Republic was mapped as a level 5 country at the highest degree of cooperation.⁵³

Negative bias regarding the missions and toward the role of France in particular was not only affirmed by the use of mostly negative quotes, but also by the abundance of hostile narratives among the surveyed articles, especially in the context of Operation Barkhane. In fact, whereas criticism of MINUSMA and MINUSCA was mostly aimed at their lack of success, articles in the context of Barkhane often served as a platform for conspiracy theories and criticism against France. The general theme of anti-Western narratives is a continuation of mass communication narratives utilised in the Soviet era, which were also found to be prevalent in other recent studies⁵⁴ and are considered to resonate with local populations due to the fact that Russia, unlike many Western nations, was never a colonial power in Africa.⁵⁵ In addition, the narrative landscape has become more intricate and saturated in recent years, with a greater variety of narratives present.



3. RUSSIA'S ACTIVITIES IN THE INFORMATION SPACE OF THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

This chapter is based on social media analysis of pro-Russian content on Facebook pages, Facebook profiles, Facebook groups, Telegram channels, Telegram profiles, Twitter feeds, and websites. Working with a programmer, all posts from several Facebook pages with pro-Russian narratives were scraped. CrowdTangle was used to discover other Facebook pages and groups sharing similar material. The study followed a general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis, during which narratives were manually detected.

Capitalising on a small, underfunded and underdeveloped media environment⁵⁶, Russia has created or co-opted a constellation of social media and web publications, as well as a terrestrial broadcast outlet, to transmit its narratives regarding the Central African Republic (CAR).

Russia has backed up its communication with action. After a 2017 meeting between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, Russia started providing weapons and security training to the CAR with approval from the UN Security Council.

The CAR's traditional Western supporters, mostly France and the United States, have been reticent to provide lethal aid, concerned that the weapons will end up in rebel hands and further fuel the ongoing conflict.

As with much of sub-Saharan Africa, radio is the most popular and widely-accessible medium in the Central African Republic.⁵⁷ The EU-funded radio station, Radio Ndeke Luka, is widely regarded as one of the most objective outlets. MINUSCA also funds its own radio station, called Guira FM. Aside from a state-run radio station, there are another two dozen privately-owned radio stations.

International state-funded broadcasters Radio France International (RFI), Voice of America (VOA), Deutsche Welle (DW), and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) also broadcast primarily in French on radio airwaves in the country.

Newspapers are not widely distributed. The World Bank estimates that roughly 4.3 percent of Central Africans have access to the internet — amongst the lowest internet penetration in the world.⁵⁸



The narrow market, however, makes this medium especially powerful for orchestrated information campaigns targeting ‘the wealthy, the educated and the elite’.⁵⁹

Russia’s involvement in the country dramatically escalated after President Touadéra met with Russia’s foreign minister in October 2017. A Russian government communique noted that the two countries plan to ‘build up practical co-operation in the political, trade, economic, and cultural areas and pointed to the considerable potential for partnership in mineral resources exploration’.⁶⁰

In October 2020, Russia opened an office in Bangui representing its defence ministry.⁶¹ Russia has also provided military training for the FACA, police, gendarme, and presidential guard.⁶² About 40 Russians also augment Touadéra’s personal security detail.⁶³ Thirty Russian soldiers have joined the ranks of MINUSCA.⁶⁴

Former Russian intelligence official Valery Zakharov was installed as Touadéra’s national security advisor.⁶⁵

Multiple reports allege the Russians in the CAR are either Russian special forces or members of the Kremlin-linked private military company, Wagner Group.⁶⁷ Zakharov claims they are merely reservists.⁶⁷ Armed Russian citizens are providing armed security services for a Moscow-linked company operating in the CAR.⁶⁸

Estimates of the total number of Russians in the CAR vary from 250 to 1,000.⁶⁹

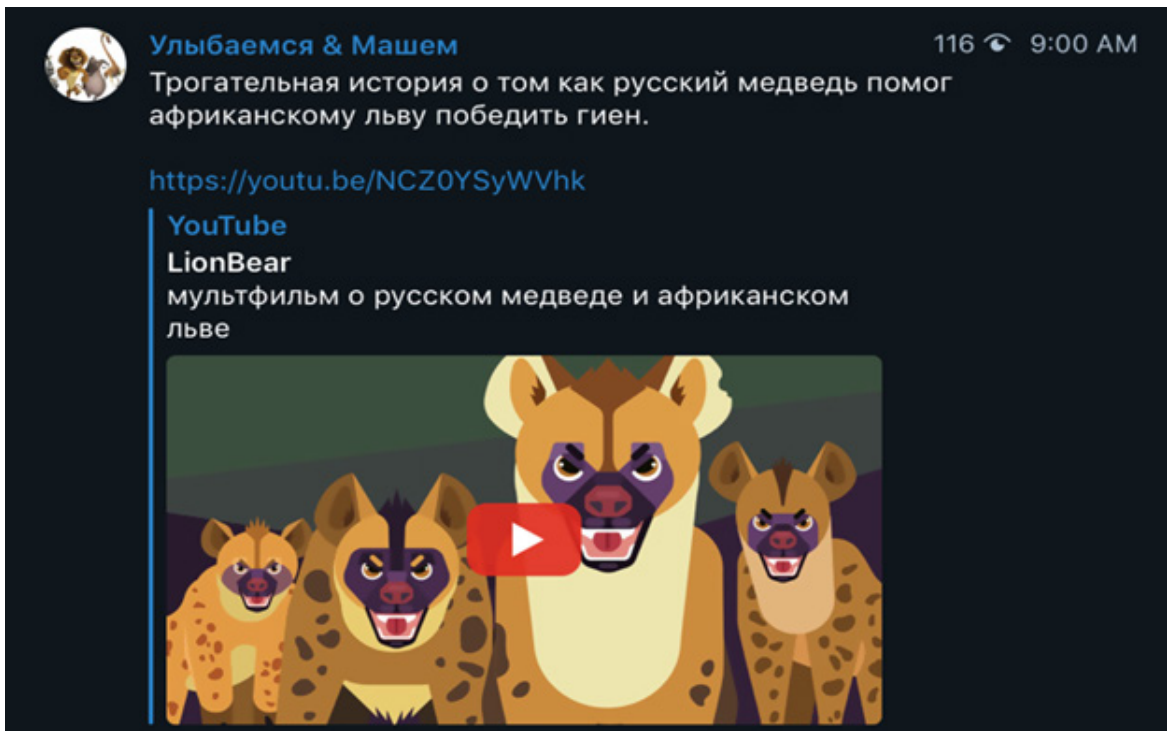
Extensive investigative reporting has shown that Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin is affiliated with various companies in the CAR and is leading Russia’s covert operations in Africa.⁷⁰ A close confidant of Putin, Prigozhin, was indicted in the United States for financing the Internet Research Agency’s ‘information warfare’ during the 2016 American election.⁷¹

Narrative 1: Russia Empowers the CAR

‘No one came to our aid except the Russian Federation,’ said Albert Yaloke Mokpeme, the spokesman for Touadéra, while the EU invests about \$15 million annually for the EUTM. MINUSCA has its own training mission of CAR security forces.⁷² The MINUSCA budget is roughly \$1 billion per year.⁷³ Collectively, the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France and Italy — which are all NATO members — pay for about 48.7 percent of the UN’s peacekeeping budget; meanwhile, Russia contributes about 3 percent.⁷⁴

Russia promoted a street protest with 20,000 people in Bangui condemning the arms embargo on a variety of pro-Russia social media and websites, including Sputnik.⁷⁵ As a reporter in the CAR, the researcher learned from multiple reliable sources that CAR politicians routinely pay people to attend such events to achieve political ends.





Bangui Buzz
 September 26 at 7:48 AM · 🌐

Quand toi et tes potes vont demander la levée de l'embargo a l'ONU
 When you and your friends are going to ask for the levée of the un ban

⚙️ · Hide original · Rate this translation



A FACEBOOK PAGE CALLED “THE GREAT RETURN OF RUSSIA IN THE CAR” CREATED A GRAPHIC CON-DEMNING THE ARMS EMBARGO. (SOURCE: FACEBOOK)

Russia succeeded in empowering the CAR by providing long-sought weapons and challenging the weapons embargo. Messaging surrounding the weapons provision and ‘strengthening’ of FACA was repeatedly amplified in pro-Russia publications in the CAR.⁷⁶ Other articles noted how Russia was returning national pride and dignity to the country.⁷⁷

Russia has worked to present itself as coming to the aid of the CAR. An animated short film distributed online by a Russian-language account on YouTube shows the bear of Russia coming to the rescue of a lion representing the CAR that is being attacked by a pack of rebellious hyenas, i.e. the armed groups. The bear restores order and they all live happily ever after.





Narrative 2: Russia Brings Peace to the CAR

While Russia benefits from stability within the CAR and an empowered Touadéra, the security situation for Central Africans has not demonstrably improved thanks to Russian involvement. The peace deal ultimately ‘fuelled a war economy, increased the financial and political power of armed group leaders, and deepened the crisis’.⁷⁸

Narrative 3: The West Destabilises the CAR

A critical element in Russia’s information campaign in the CAR is the portrayal of the West, mostly France and the United States, as actively working to create instability in the CAR in order to keep the

country weak and subservient.⁷⁹ Various stories alleged numerous planned and failed coup d’états against Touadéra.⁸⁰ In article by a pro-Russian non-profit organisation alleged that France paid Chad \$44 million ‘to kill poor innocent people, to end a democratic elected power, whose president [of the CAR] refuses the French dictatorship’.⁸¹

Another pro-Russia outlet alleged French intelligence services sponsored a coup by a political opponent of Touadéra with funding and material support and coordination with Muslim militias in Bangui. The outlet’s source for this information: ‘several thousand Bangui residents’.⁸²

The disinformation also targeted MINUSCA.⁸³ Local media reports alleged the peacekeeping force was ‘plotting’ against the CAR government by ‘funding armed groups, supporting terrorism or deliberately allowing violent attacks to occur’. MINUSCA condemned the ‘inflammatory disinformation’.⁸⁴





A CARTOON SHOWS MACRON WHIPPING CENTRAL AFRICANS TO EXTRACT DIAMONDS. UNDER FRENCH COLONIAL RULE, FOREIGN COMPANIES EXPLOITED DIAMONDS, GOLD, COTTON, TIMBER, RUBBER AND OTHER NATURAL RESOURCES FROM THE CAR. (SOURCE: FACEBOOK)

Narrative 4: The West is a Coloniser

The Western destabilisation narrative is interconnected with the theme that the West wants to continue dominating and looting the CAR as a coloniser.⁸⁵

In examining social media and web posts over the past two years, the research found consistent references to France's colonial history in the CAR, with assertions that the West wants to 'keep the CAR in a new form of slavery'.⁸⁶ Pro-Russian media also regularly recalled the sexual violence perpetrated by MINUSCA and French forces.⁸⁷

Narrative 5: Russia Supports Pan-Africanism

In sharp contrast, Russia has presented itself as a supporter of the people of Africa by embracing Pan-Africanism — a social-political movement and worldview that seeks to 'unify and uplift blacks on the African continent'.⁸⁸ The Soviet Union supported Pan-Africanism as early as the 1920s.⁸⁹

A Sputnik article noted how the United States and United Kingdom are 'in the sights' of Pan-Africanists, but France is the top target because of its military strength in Africa.⁹⁰ A variety of Pan-African social media accounts have called for France to withdraw from the CAR.⁹¹

In the CAR, at least one pro-Russian Facebook page was set up specifically to promote Pan-Africanism.⁹²





ZAKHAROV PRESENTS A TRAMPOLINE TO A LOCAL ORGANISATION IN BANGUI.
(SOURCE: FONTANKA)

Narrative 6: Russia Develops the CAR

Through traditional public relations activities in person and online, Russia has promoted its presence in the CAR and its development activities. The Prigozhin-linked company, Lobaye Invest, sponsored the country's first Miss Central Africa Republic beauty pageant, which was presided over by Zakharov.⁹³ Russia has organised soccer matches, film screenings for children, fit-

ness contests, Tae Kwon Do contests, and a drawing and poetry contest with a beach vacation in Crimea awarded to the winner.⁹⁴

In February 2019, the Russians travelled in a 'humanitarian convoy' from Sudan into the CAR. Armed rebels escorted the Russians.⁹⁵ Prigozhin's company promoted the convoy through a short documentary-style film from a Russian filmmaker who previously created disinformation about Syria for a Russian state news agency.⁹⁶

One of the most prominent overt communication tools used by Russia is their own





A BILLBOARD IN BANGUI PROCLAIMS IN THE LOCAL SANGO LANGUAGE THAT THE CAR IS “HAND IN HAND” WITH RUSSIA. (SOURCE: FACEBOOK)

FM and shortwave radio station, Lengo Songo, which means ‘Let’s Create Solidarity’ in the local Sango language.⁹⁷ The station broadcasts farther than state radio and is projected to broadcast nationwide with the installation of 17 additional antennas.⁹⁸

Narrative 7: Don’t Trust Western Media

With Russia paying for its own media distribution channels on the terrestrial airwaves, as well as its network on web and

social media channels, the next logical step for Russia was to dismiss the competition — Western media. RFI and France 24, a French-government funded TV station, are by far the most popular outlets and are commonly called ‘propaganda’ by pro-Russian media.⁹⁹

In the past two years, multiple French reporters have been accused in local media of writing fake news and of being spies — a charge that can be deadly in volatile conflict environments like the CAR.¹⁰⁰



Russian outlets and Russia's foreign ministry also work to discredit critical reporting on the CAR.¹⁰¹

In an unusual episode, the director of Russia's Lengo Songo radio station alleged that he was attacked in June 2019 by five armed 'thugs' sent by political opponents of Touadéra. The assailants allegedly insisted Lengo Songo change its editorial stance.¹⁰² The director claims the American non-profit organisation, Search for Common Ground, also attempted to bribe him with about \$450 to alter news coverage.¹⁰³

Russian officials have offered training, cash and equipment to local journalists then threatened those who refused.¹⁰⁴

Narrative 8: The West Neglects the CAR

A less prominent piece of the Russian narrative is that the West has not been doing enough to support the CAR. Similar messaging about Western inaction existed prior to the recent Russian efforts in the CAR, specifically about MINUSCA troops.¹⁰⁵

Tactics

The following quantitative analysis examines three types of data for a select set of pro-Russian Facebook pages, Telegram channels and websites: quantity of content, themes of the content, and word frequency within the content.

The Russian information war in the Central African Republic uses a constantly growing and evolving constellation of media publications and non-governmental organisations to spread its narratives throughout the Central African Republic, across Africa, and worldwide. Russia has a dominating presence for a minimal budget.

The Russian information campaign deployed in the CAR uses a variety of tactics to spread its narratives. These techniques are consistent with those used by Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency during the 2016 US presidential elections.¹⁰⁶

They include:

- Repeated Sharing of Russian Narratives Across Platforms
- Incorporating Relevant Social and Cultural Issues
- Using Local Voices
- Creating Division and Amplifying Conspiracies
- Sponsoring Non-Governmental Organisations



CONCLUSIONS

Despite the highly publicized achievements of the Sochi summit, Russia is still a minor player in Africa. This must be acknowledged when analyzing Russia's operations on the continent. Due to its current economic and military situation, Russia is incapable of devoting substantial resources to Africa. Although Russia has an interest in building closer relations, such as through arms exports, Africa does not feature among its top priorities.

As in other regions, Russia's policies in Africa are elite-oriented rather than population-oriented. Russia relies upon and seeks the favor of local rulers, including dictators, which often fosters corruption.¹⁰⁷ This pragmatic policy focuses on short-term gains and consequently does not provide long-term stability to the continent. This policy is based on Kremlins's current leadership's perception of the very word 'stability.' Stability can mean both the peaceful transition of power from one party to another or the prevention of a transition of power altogether.

Russia's ability to publicize its successes is enormous. Even though many of their contracts are declarations or memoranda of understanding, they are often broadcast as concluded deals. Despite this public image, Russia's operations have not always been successful, often because they lack expertise and experience with the environment. Moscow has proven to be a weaker player in various clashes with the US and China, as well as the civil societies of Sudan, Madagascar, Zimbabwe, and South Africa.



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